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# Rev. William Sloane Coffin: CONTROVERSIAL CLERGYMAN

*Accused of being  
religiously shallow,  
he says his politics  
are rooted in Bible*

*Master showman  
of the left is taking  
his 'peace ministry'  
outside the church*

By MARY REINHOLZ

*Clown - up of J!*

IT'S SOMETIMES hard to know whether he's a dyed-in-the-wool Protestant divine or a divinely inspired protest leader. The Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr. has been a

scourge of the powers-that-be for so long that he has become a kind of institution, a one-man extravaganza of religious and political controversy.

His supporters say that the senior minister of Riverside Church is a loving pastor whose anti-establishment stances spring from a profound religious belief. His critics say he's a master showman and political activist who lacks theological depth and wouldn't mind setting up his own shadow government.

More extreme Coffin opponents, citing his three-year stint in the CIA and his later support of Marxist leaders, claim he's in league with the KGB and the devil. Yale-educated Coffin, a member of the W. & J. Sloane furniture family, whose ancestors go back to the Pilgrims on his mother's side, says he's steeped in the Old Testament prophecies. "Justice is central, not ancillary, to the Christian faith," he says during an interview at his fifth-floor office overlooking the Hudson in Morningside Heights. "Countries that are more concerned with disorder than injustice invariably produce both.

"That's a pragmatic view. It's also

an ethical view and it's a biblical view. Twenty-seven-hundred years ago, the prophet Amos said to such governments, 'You think to defer the day of misfortune. . . . but you'll hasten the reign of violence.'"

**A**T RIVERSIDE, across the street from where his uncle Henry Sloane Coffin was president of the Union Theological Seminary, he has denounced poverty in the midst of plenty, U.S. aid to the contras and funds for nuclear buildup. Of the arms race, he says flatly: "The great moral issues that face this country and the world are whether or not we're going to blow ourselves up in the next few decades. Only God has the authority to end life on this planet."

Last Sunday, wearing a bright red ministerial gown and looking a bit like a renegade Puritan with his high-domed forehead and white curls, he strode up to Riverside's liberal pulpit and announced his resignation, effective Dec. 31, in typically forthright fashion.

Coffin, who turned 63 last month, will head a new disarmament organization in Washington, D.C., called Sane-Freeze, a merger of two peace groups (the Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy and the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign).

Worshippers gave Coffin a standing ovation, their applause and shouts of "Bravo!" rolling in warm waves over this energetic, gutsy, ambitious and complicated man known as a leading opponent of the Vietnam War when he was chaplain at Yale.

He has a richly textured resume: It includes harmony lessons in Paris at age 14, when he longed to be a concert pianist; service as a World War II infantry officer; fluency in French and Russian; his anti-Stalinist work for the CIA in the 1950s; and the study of God and man at Yale.

Many parishioners were moved to tears by Coffin's announcement. "I'm saddened because Bill has brought so much life and vitality to the church," says Louis Gropp, on the search committee that



*One opponent said Coffin turned his church into a "notorious den for politicians of the left."*

brought Coffin to the interdenominational church in 1977. "He's done wonderful things."

Others were plainly pleased. "He's finally in charge of an organization that is more to his liking. And this is good for the church. The tail will now stop wagging the dog," says the Rev. Channing E. Phillips, a black Riverside minister, now on sick leave, who has openly feuded with Coffin.

Gropp acknowledged that a "tiny minority" of Riverside's 3,000-plus congregation had bitterly opposed Coffin's left/liberal politics and some of the programs his leadership fostered. These included an educational peace and disarmament task force, sanctuary for a Guatemalan refugee family in defiance of immigration laws and a fellowship group for gays and lesbians.

Coffin seemed eager to quash speculation that he was being driven out of Riverside by a small band of ideological foes. "After being in a place for 10 years and you're 63, you've got maybe one biggie left," Coffin told a press conference after the service. "I don't think four-and-a-half people could have chased me out."

He was referring to his critics in the Men's Class, a bible studies group that has sniped at Coffin ever since he arrived at Riverside. Through its unsigned and often vitriolic newsletter, The Messenger, the Men's Class has impugned Coffin's patriotism and dredged up gossip details about his private life, church sources say. William Coles, president of the Men's Class, refused to comment.

But Men's Class member Bryan Sterling acknowledged that he wrote a much-published editorial last March in the group's newsletter accusing Coffin of mismanagement and calling for his resignation. It said Coffin had brought Riverside to the brink of financial ruin and turned it into a "notorious den for politicians of the left."

Coffin, who dismisses his detractors in The Men's Class as reactionary elders spreading "a witch's brew of lies and half-truths," admits that Riverside is in a fiscal crisis, but he attributes that in part to inflation. He says the church, which had a \$1.2 million deficit at the end of June, will need three years to get out of the financial woods.

An ordained Presbyterian minister, Coffin has long seemed to court controversy. During his 18-year tenure at Yale, he became a Freedom Rider, going South to protest local segregation laws. He was an early opponent of the Vietnam War and, with pediatrician Benjamin Spock, was arrested in 1968 for aiding draft resisters. His conviction was overturned on appeal.

Despite his reputation for hell-raising, Coffin can be a conciliatory influence, says his friend Paul Moore, Episcopal bishop of the Diocese of New York. Moore, who was on the Board of Trustees at Yale during the tumultuous student protests of the 1960s, says Coffin helped keep things cool. "Yale did not have any campus rioting. Bill was in a leadership position. He had the total confidence of the students and the president." Adds Moore: "He's also one of the most loving people I know."

Coffin, married for the third time in 1984 to Randy Wilson of Vermont, has had his share of personal tragedy. His son Alexander, 25, died in a 1983 car accident. He has two other children—Amy, 29, and David, 27—by his first wife, Eva Rubinstein, daughter of the late pianist Arthur Rubinstein.

It was World War II that seemed to catapult Coffin into the ministry. "World War II raised all the important questions: Why do human beings behave the way they do to each other? Either it's man's inhumanity to man or people falling on a grenade that there's no time to throw back."

He says his new position will offer him the opportunity to continue a ministry of peace and social justice full time. Asked how he knows he is right about complex subjects, he says, "I just feel it in my bones. Put it this way: All Americans will agree that all men are created equal, but not too many feel the monstrosity of inequality."

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